Spoilers?

Third Parties and Independents in U.S. Elections

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG and DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Has a Communist ever run for the U.S. presidency? How about an independent, with no party affiliation?

The answer to both questions is: yes, during many elections over the past century. But few have been heard of and fewer are remembered. None had an actual chance to win, given the costs and time needed to run a national campaign, the difficulties of getting on the ballot and the way the U.S. electoral system has developed over the years to favor candidates from one of the major parties: Republican or Democratic.

For more than 150 years, every U.S. President has belonged to one of these two parties, though it was not always so. America's first two Presidents, and four other early ones, belonged to parties that no longer exist. And the Democrats and Republicans were once a single party.

Now there are more than 30 other political parties, known as third parties. Though their candidates have very little chance of making it to the White House, they are sometimes called "spoilers" because they can divert key votes from the major parties' candidates during elections.

J. David Gillespie, retired professor of political science at Presbyterian College in South Carolina, and author of *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America*, notes that third parties play several important roles—from educating voters on specific issues to affecting real change in government policy.

Third parties actually strengthen the government, Gillespie says, by providing a legitimate outlet for those unhappy with the status quo. They give "dissidents a chance to air their grievances within the confines of the electoral process," he explains. "And that, then, probably reduces the prospect of more violent or more aggressive kinds of approaches to political action in this country."

So why do third parties spend time and money on a presidential candidate they know will lose?

They aren't launching candidates as much as they are launching issues. They want to get the attention of voters on topics such as climate change, nuclear proliferation and poverty. They also may hope to change the views of one of the leading presidential candidates.

In the 2008 presidential election, Americans will see candidates from a number of parties on the ballot. These include the Constitution Party, the Green Party and the Libertarian Party, most of which will select their candidates this summer.

A notable independent in the race this year is Ralph Nader, a consumer advocate whose most remarkable run for the presidency was in 2000 when, as the Green Party candidate, he received 2.7 percent of the extremely close national vote in the race that also included George W. Bush and then Vice President Al Gore.

Many Democrats believe that Nader's bid cost Gore the election. Just 537 votes separated Bush and Gore in Florida. Nader received 97,488 votes in that state, and exit polls indicated that his voters would have favored Gore over Bush had Nader not been in the race.

Part of the American psyche is a penchant for bucking the trend or favoring the outsider or underdog, so public interest in third party and independent candidates persists.

It's also exciting to consider that in a close presidential contest, outsiders can take away enough votes from a major-party candidate so that he or she loses the presidency.

This has happened several times in U.S. history. In 1912, former President Theodore Roosevelt's third-party candidacy (he ran representing the Bull Moose Party) took more than 27 percent and split the Republican vote, allowing a Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, to win the presidency. George Wallace in 1968 and Ross Perot in 1992 took significant percentages of voters from both major parties.

Each state sets its own rules for how independents can get their names on the November presidential ballots. To meet the filing deadlines for all 50 states, most independents interested in entering the race declare their candidacy by mid-March.

In the 2000 and 2004 elections, candidates of 12 third parties appeared on some or all state ballots. Some, like the prohibition parties (primarily against the sale of alcohol) and various socialist groups, garnered only enough voter support signatures to qualify for the ballot in a few states.

Others, however, were on the ballot in more than half of the 50 states in 2004: the Green Party, an environmentally concerned group (28 states); the Constitution Party, a Christian fundamentalist group (38); the Libertarian Party, a fiscally conservative and socially liberal group (49); and the Reform Party, a liberal reform group (at least 37).

The most significant obstacle these candidates face is the fear among voters about "wasting" their vote if they cast ballots for these long-shots. Studies have shown that even when Americans like an outsider best, they will vote for their second choice from a major party.

In addition, third parties rarely have the large statewide organizations of the major parties; they have less expertise in running campaigns; they are less likely to be invited to televised debates, and they get less media coverage. Since they are not in power and are less well known, they find it harder to raise money and, because extraordinarily large sums are needed to compete in U.S. nationwide races, they end up having to spend more time fundraising than campaigning.

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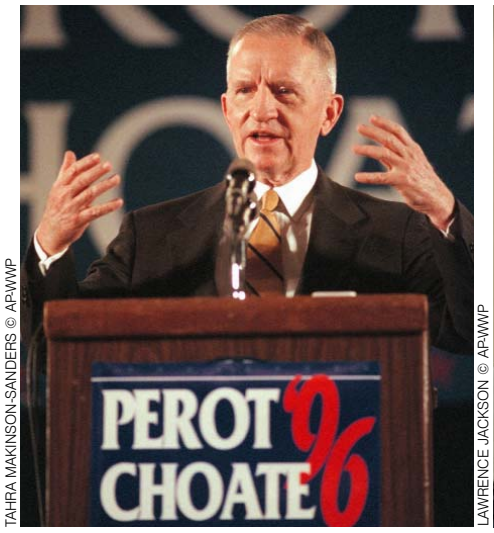

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Top: Former President Theodore Roosevelt, shown in 1904, campaigned as a third party candidate in the 1912 elections.
Above: Reform Party presidential candidate Ross Perot during his 1996 campaign.
Above right: Independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader (right) announces his selection of Matt Gonzalez, a former member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (left), as his running mate at a news conference in Washington, D.C. in February 2008.